The Power of Self-Compassion

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Kristin Neff discusses how self-compassion differs from self-esteem, why self-compassion can be hard for Americans, and the transformative effect it had on her own life--part of *Greater Good*'s podcast series.

By Jason Marsh
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Are you your own worst critic?

It's common to beat ourselves up for faults big and small. But according to psychologist Kristin Neff, that self-criticism comes at a price: It makes us anxious, dissatisfied with our life, and even depressed.

Kristin Neff

For the last decade, Neff has been a pioneer in the study of "self-compassion," the revolutionary idea that you can actually be kind to yourself, accept your own faults—and enjoy deep emotional benefits as a result. Last year, she distilled the results of her research in the popular book *Self-Compassion*. (A *Greater Good* essay we adapted from the book is the most popular piece we've ever published.)

Neff, an associate professor in human development and culture at the University of Texas, Austin, will present highlights from her work at a Greater Good Science Center seminar at UC Berkeley next Friday, March 23, called "Self-Compassion and Emotional Resilience"—part of our "Science of a Meaningful Life" seminar series. The event will be webcast live, so anyone around the world can participate.

As part of our "*Greater Good* Podcast" series, she recently spoke with *Greater Good* Editor-in-Chief Jason Marsh about how self-compassion differs from self-esteem, why self-compassion can be hard for Americans, and the transformative effect it had on her own life.

Below we present a condensed version of the discussion.

Jason Marsh: So please start by telling us: What is self-compassion?

Kristin Neff: The quick version is that it's treating yourself with the same type of kind, caring support and understanding that you would show to anyone you cared about. In fact, most of us make incredibly harsh, cruel self-judgments that we would never make about a total stranger, let alone someone we cared about.

JM: In your work you've identified three core components of self-compassion. Could you please tell us what they are?

KN: Right, the first one is self-kindness, as opposed to self-judgment. A lot of times when we suffer, we just take a very cold attitude toward ourselves. So self-compassion involves being warm and supportive—actively soothing ourselves—as opposed to being cold and judging ourselves.

The second part is remembering that imperfection is part of the shared human experience—that you're not alone in your suffering. Often, when something goes wrong, we look in the mirror and don't like what we see—we feel very isolated in that moment, as if everyone else has these perfect lives and it's just us who's flawed and defective. When we remember that imperfection is part of the shared human experience, you can actually feel more connected to people in those moments.

The third component is mindfulness. If you aren't mindfully aware that you're suffering, if you're just repressing your pain or ignoring it or getting lost in problem solving, you can't give yourself compassion. You have to say, "Wait a second. This hurts. This is really hard. This is a moment where I need compassion." If you don't want to go there, if it's too painful or you're just too busy to go there, you can't be compassionate.

JM: When I hear you describe it like that, it seems so obvious that this is something we should all try to practice. Yet the truth of the matter, which you explain in your book, is that a lot of us, most of us perhaps, are really bad at practicing self-compassion. Why do you think that is? And why is that such a bad thing?

KN: It's very interesting because in our culture, we value compassion for others. We see clearly that it's good to be a supportive friend and be kind to others, to help those in need.

We treat ourselves very differently than we treat other people. And I think there are several reasons why.

One of the big reasons is that people feel that they need to be self-critical in order to motivate themselves. We think we need to beat ourselves up if we make mistakes so that we won't do it again. It's a convoluted form of self-care: I criticize myself because I don't want to keep engaging in this behavior that's problematic.

> More on Self-Compassion
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>  Listen to this interview with Kristin Neff, and subscribe to *Greater Good*'s podcast series.
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> Register for Neff's upcoming Greater Good Science Center seminar (which includes a live webcast), "Self-Compassion and Emotional Resilience."

But that's completely counterproductive. Self-criticism is very strongly linked to depression. And depression is antithetical to motivation: You're unable to be motivated to change if you're depressed. It causes us to lose faith in ourselves, and that's going to make us less likely to try to change and conditions us for failure. If every time you fail or make a mistake you beat yourself up, you're going to very quickly try to avoid failure at all costs. It's a natural survival instinct. Which means you may not take risks—maybe you take the course that's an easy A [instead of a more challenging one].

Maybe the biggest problem with using self-criticism as a motivator is that if it's really painful to be honest with yourself about your weaknesses—because you know you're going to tear yourself to shreds with self-criticism—your subconscious pulls every trick in the book to not have to own up to your weaknesses.

The easiest trick is to blame someone else. Think about fights you have with your significant other—"You did it!" "No, you did it!" Each one's trying to defend their ego, blaming the other person. But when you have self-compassion, it actually gives you the courage and the emotional safety you need to say, "Mea culpa—I did do that, I was out of line." And that clarity actually gives you not only the wisdom to see what needs changing but the emotional strength and courage to go ahead and change it.

JM: So what what's the difference between self-esteem and self-compassion?

KN: Self-compassion and self-esteem both involve positive emotions toward the self. But self-esteem is about judging yourself positively: I am good. Or, unfortunately, if you can't keep up that self-definition: I am bad.

Self-compassion does not involve judgment or evaluation. It's not about, "What type of person am I?" It's just about: I'm suffering—can I respond to my

suffering with kindness, understanding, caring, and concern?

Self-esteem is present when we succeed. Self-compassion is a way of relating to ourselves kindly when we fail.

Self-esteem is all about being special and above average. You subtly try to position yourself above other people so you can maintain your self-esteem. But self-compassion is about shared humanity—it's all about being average. It's about being a human: We have strengths and beautiful qualities, and we have weaknesses; we succeed and we fail and it's all part of this shared human condition.

JM: I want to talk a little bit about your personal experience with self-compassion, how you really came to embrace it both personally and scientifically. How did you personally come to believe in the importance of self-compassion?

KN: I had a hippie, New-Agey childhood. But when I got to Berkeley for grad school, I decided I had to reject all that. And then what happened was—if you read my book, I tell my dirty laundry—but basically I was going through a very messy divorce, and I was stressed about finishing my dissertation and finding a job. There was a lot going on in my life. And I realized that when I just went for the intellect and tried to reject all my spirituality, I was shutting myself down. So I decided to give Buddhism a try.

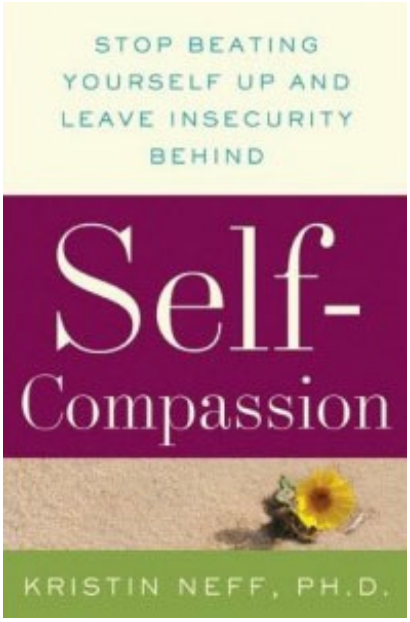
I started meditating. And the lady teaching the meditation class talked a lot about self-compassion, and I just thought, "Oh my god, not only is this what I need, but this makes so much sense. Why has no one ever just said before, 'You really should be kind to yourself, and it'll actually be really healthy if you are?'" It immediately changed my life, so much so that when I got remarried shortly thereafter, we ended our marriage vows with the vow to help each other be more self-compassionate. We were both so moved by the concept.

After doing my post-doc and getting the job at UT-Austin, it was kind of scary because no one knew how to even define self-compassion, let alone conduct research on it in academia, although a lot of people had written about it in other circles. But I just knew that this was so important, I wanted it to be my life's work. I started doing research on it, and I continued to practice it—going on retreats, practicing in my daily life, etc. But when it really saved me was when my son was diagnosed with autism in 2004.

I can't even imagine how I would have coped if I didn't have my self-compassion practice. I was able to fully accept my grief, not feel guilty for grieving, which a lot of autism parents do: "How can I be grieving for my child who I love so much?" I was able to accept all my complex, intense emotions, to really soothe and comfort myself for what I was going through.

With autism, you are powerless. When my son used to have tantrums in public, there was nothing I could do. I was completely powerless. I could try to keep him safe and that's about it. So self-compassion allowed me to accept that, and open my heart to it—he'd be throwing a tantrum, and I would just be saying, "Let me be kind to myself right now, let me be kind to myself, let me…" I would actually focus on myself rather than him, after making sure he was safe. I couldn't help him, but I could help myself in that moment.

Kristin Neff's book, *Self-Compassion* (William Morrow, 2011).



Self-compassion gave me the emotional stability I needed to help him, and then ultimately to embrace him, with a much more open heart and open mind than I would have been able to—to not try to fix him or control him but to celebrate who I was and kind of follow his lead. I won't go into it here, but my husband wrote a book, and we made a documentary, called *The Horse Boy*, which is really about what happens if you open your heart and your mind to a child with autism or special needs.

JM: So it sounds like self-compassion was a revelation for you in your personal life and your family life. But why study it? Why would it necessarily follow that you should study it scientifically, especially given that there was a chance you could find no measurable benefits?

KN: Well, to be totally honest, I was convinced of the benefits and felt that what I wanted to do was demonstrate empirically that there were benefits. I don't know what I would've done if there were no benefits. I probably would've still practiced self-compassion because it worked for me, but I would've been a bit flabbergasted if the data didn't come out. Although I must admit, I was

surprised by how strongly the links were between self-compassion and well-being—they're really strong, robust associations. I thought, "Wow, we're onto something here."

JM: Looking back over the last decade or so of research, what are the findings that you think really attest to the benefits of self-compassion?

KN: Well, there's the data supporting the fact that self-compassion has the same mental health benefits as self-esteem: less depression, more optimism, greater happiness, more life satisfaction. But self-compassion offers the benefits without the drawbacks of self-esteem. Self-esteem is associated with narcissism; self-compassion isn't. It's self-compassion, not self-esteem, that predicts stability of self-worth—a type of self-worth that isn't contingent on outcomes—as well as less social comparison, less reactive anger.

Now a lot of research is coming out around health behaviors, showing that people who practice self-compassion make really wise health choices. They exercise more for intrinsic reasons, they can stick to their diets, they go to the doctor more often, they practice safer sex. All this research is coming out showing that self-compassion is not just a good idea, and it doesn't just make you feel good, it makes you act in healthier ways.

Also, people who are self-compassionate are kinder, more giving, and supportive to their relationship partners.

JM: Those research results sound encouraging, but could they just reflect that people who are self-compassionate also have these other traits and practice these other behaviors? Or is there research suggesting that self-compassion can actually be taught, and that by learning self-compassion, those other benefits will follow?

KN: Yeah, the research is already there, and it's going to continue. There's a lot of research on MBSR—Jon Kabat-Zinns' Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program—and all the benefits that accrue from that. Well, it turns out that self-compassion increases through participation in the course; in fact, it may be that self-compassion is perhaps even the most powerful outcome of MBSR training that enhances well-being.

Some of the studies I'm talking about are based on short-term interventions, training people over four weeks. But my colleague Chris Germer and I have developed an eight-week program, very similar in structure to mindfulness-based stress reduction, where two hours a week for eight weeks, we talk about self-compassion, we teach exercises, we do self-compassion meditations, interpersonal exercises. I'll have the data very soon to see if it does increase well-being. We've done pilot testing without a control group and the results were really good.

I could see this going into the schools. Already, people are starting to talk about teaching compassion in the schools, so I'd like to add this piece of having compassion for yourself as well.

JM: That brings up a point you mentioned earlier. When you talk about teaching self-compassion in schools, I think that might raise some red flags in some people's minds. I'm thinking of the concern I've heard before: Is self-compassion going to make people complacent and unmotivated to improve themselves and accomplish more?

KN: Yeah, that is a very common concern. It's actually, I think, the number one block to self-compassion: the fear that if I'm too kind to myself, I'll be complacent.

The research doesn't show that. The research really supports that people who are self-compassionate, their standards are just as high for themselves, but they don't get as upset when they fail to meet their goals—they cope with it more productively. And as a result, when self-compassionate people don't reach a goal, they're much more likely to pick themselves up, dust themselves off, and re-engage in a new goal.

Self-compassion is associated with what's called "learning goals" rather than "performance goals." So people who are self-compassionate, they want to learn and grow for its own sake, not because they want to impress other people. There is a huge body of research showing that if your goal is to learn as opposed to just impress others, that's a much more sustainable way of learning and growing.

JM: So if you could engineer our society in a way that fosters more self-compassion, how would you do that?

KN: I think our obsession with self-esteem and competition does mean that we'd have to engineer things differently here. Is that what we want to be promoting in the schools? Is that what parents want to be promoting?

We don't want kids to hate themselves, we want them to feel worthy, but is life all about being better than others? Is it all about being special and above average? Or is about being a human being as happy and healthy as you possibly can be, about reaching your own potential? And I think if we made that type of cultural shift, at the level of parenting and education, I think we'd have a real chance of shifting things at the larger macro level.